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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes findings of a 3-year study conducted by the SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education (SERVE) that examined the effectiveness of the implementation of a public-private partnership effort at South Pointe Elementary School in Miami, Florida. South Pointe was the first public school in the United States to be run by a private, for-profit education company, Education Alternatives, Inc., (EAI), under a five-year contract. The Tesseract Way program, developed by EAI, is comprised of 27 teaching/learning components. The SERVE study focused on three successful components used at South Pointe--the parent empowerment program, extensive use of technology, and the changing role of teachers. Based on a 3-year review of the school's curriculum, it appeared that by July 1994 South Pointe was successful in implementing the teaching/learning principles and that these principles were institutionalized into the daily activities of teachers and students. Findings were based on personal interviews with staff, parents, and students, and inschool observations. In June 1995, the Dade County School Board did not renew the contract with EAI. District-office reports indicated that South Pointe students did not excel any more than did other Dade County students. EAI responded that test scores are not the only or even the best measure of student progress. Appendices contain an illustration of the Tesseract Way components and results of the 1992-93 parent survey. (Contains 19 references.) (LMI)

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South Pointe Elementary School Assessment Project

♦ A Special Issues Report

EA 027 114

SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education

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South Pointe Elementary School Assessment Project

by
Thomas H. Peeler

1995

A Special Report Funded by

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About the SERVE Laboratory

ERVE, the SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education, is a coalition of educators, business leaders, governors, and policymakers who are seeking comprehensive and lasting improvement in education in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina. The name of the Laboratory reflects a commitment to creating a shared vision of the future of education in the Southeast.

The mission of SERVE is to provide leadership, support, and research to assist state and local efforts in improving educational outcomes, especially for at-risk and rural students. Laboratory goals are to address critical issues in the region, work as a catalyst for positive change, serve as a broker of exemplary research and practice, and become an invaluable source of information for individuals working to promote systemic educational improvement.

Collaboration and networking are at the heart of SERVE's mission; the laboratory's structure is itself a model of collaboration. The laboratory has four offices in the region to better serve the needs of state and local education stakeholders. SERVE's Greensboro office manages a variety of research and development projects that meet regional needs for the development of new products, services, and information about emerging issues. The development of this manual was funded through such an R&D effort. The laboratory's information office is located in Tallahassee. Field services offices are located in Atlanta, Greensboro, Tallahassee, and on the campus of Delta State University in Cleveland, Mississippi.

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Executive Summary

SouthPointe Elementary School Assessment Project

Thomas H. Peeler

In July 1994, the SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education (SERVE) concluded a three-year study of the effectiveness of the implementation of a public-private partnership effort at South Pointe Elementary School in Miami, Florida. South Pointe was the first public school in the country to be run by a private, for-profit education company, Education Alternatives, Inc., (EAI), under a five-year contract. This reports the effort by looking at the planning and implementation process that took place.

The Tesseract Way program is made up of twenty-seven pieces, or teaching/learning components, of a "puzzle" developed by EAI. The "puzzle" is shown in Appendix A. The study conducted by SERVE focused on three successful teaching/learning components used at South Pointe that could be implemented in schools throughout the country: the parent empowerment program, extensive use of technology, and the changing role of teachers.

Based on a three-year review of South Pointe's curriculum, it appeared that by July 1994, the school was successful in implementing the teaching/learning principles, and that these principles were institutionalized into the daily activities of teachers and students. These conclusions were based upon personal interviews with staff, parents, and students, and in-school observations of the reviewer.

The original proposal to study South Pointe included a plan to disaggregate achievement scores for the final year according to student longevity at the school; however, this was not done as the Dade County School's Office of Accountability had not released the necessary data at the time this study was concluded.

In June 1995, the Dade County School Board did not renew the contract with EAI. Reports by the district office indicated that the South Pointe students did not academically excel any more than other comparable students in Dade County. EAI reported in the June 14, 1995, *Washington Post* (as cited in the New York Times, June 25) that test scores "... are not the only, or even the best, measure of the progress students are making."

Introduction

When South Pointe Elementary School opened its doors for the first time in Miami in September 1991, it became the nation's first public-private partnership in education. EAI and the Dade County Public Schools signed a five-year contract which stipulated that EAI would manage the classroom activities at the school. The staff at South Pointe was trained during the summer to implement EAI's Tesseract Way educational program.

The name "Tesseract" comes from the famous children's book "A Wrinkle in Time" by Madeleine L'Engle. She wrote about children who took a fantasy trip through a tesseract, a fifth dimensional corridor for traveling to exciting new worlds. Tesseract is the trademark for all of EAI's schools.

The media attention to this unique agreement was immediate and widespread. Good Morning America and the three major network news programs, ABC, NBC, and CBS periodically reviewed the South Pointe program. Several national magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, and most major newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Miami Herald*, and the *Wall Street Journal* examined the South Pointe program. Major educational journals such as "Education Leadership" and "The School Administrator" also featured South Pointe Elementary School.

South Pointe Elementary School's Demographic Information

The enrollment of South Pointe during the 1991-1992 school year was approximately 700 students. In June 1994, enrollment had risen to 730 students. The ethnic composition of South Pointe remained stable with a 66% Hispanic population, an 11% African American population and a 23% white and/or other ethnic group(s) population. Approximately 77% of the students participated in the free and reduced lunch program, and approximately 28% of the students were limited English speaking. The demographic data on South Pointe closely reflected the Dade County Schools' minority ratio, the percentage of limited English speaking students, and the percentage of students on the free and reduced lunch program.

Final Report

This report culminates a three-year study conducted by SERVE, and authorized by Dade County Public Schools, to study the implementation and effectiveness of the public-private partnership effort between Dade County Public Schools and Educational Alternatives, Inc. The findings represent the opinions of the consultant for the study, and are based on results of interviews and observations. This final report reviews the status of private education companies in the public school arena, summarizes the assessment reports submitted to SERVE for the 1992 and 1993 school years, and describes three components of the Tesseract Way program that could be implemented in schools throughout the country: parent empowerment, use of technology, and the changing role of teachers.

Public/Private Partnerships in Education

Following the pioneering relationship between the Dade County Public Schools and EAI, a gradual increase in the number of public/private school partnerships occurred. For example:

- The Walt Disney Company, which created Tomorrowland and the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT), entered into an agreement with Florida's Osceola County School District and Stetson University, a private institution in DeLand, Florida, to build a state-of-the-art public pre K-12 school, Celebration School, that is scheduled to open in the fall of 1996 (Education Week, 1994).

- EAI took over the operation of 12 schools in Baltimore, Maryland in 1992, and 32 schools in Hartford, Connecticut in 1994. According to the information provided by EAI, these schools continue to be in operation as of July 1995.

- Sylvan Learning Centers negotiated contracts with public schools to operate their Chapter I programs.

- Chris Whittles' Edison Project diversified its original corporate mission of building private, for-profit inner city schools and bid for public/private partnerships much like EAI has done.

The events that took place in Portsmouth, Virginia in 1994 put into perspective the growth of private education companies interested in entering the public arena. When the Portsmouth Public School District decided to solicit proposals from firms to operate five schools, it briefed 22 prospective managers who initially expressed interest in a Portsmouth contract; seven private companies eventually submitted proposals. Although the Portsmouth School District postponed its decision to award a contract to a private firm, the number of potential bidders indicated the growth of interest in forming public/private partnerships.

Critics of privatization say such partnerships, charter schools, and associated efforts fail to show results, and that they produce nothing more than what any good school would produce. Henry Levin of Stanford University was quoted by *The Palm Beach Post* on June 21, 1995, as saying that companies such as EAI "... are learning reality at public expense."

Review of the 1991-1992 Assessment Report

The first evaluation report on South Pointe was submitted in June 1992, (Peeler, 1992) and focused on the extent to which the educational program being offered at South Pointe represented the best educational principles as defined by a review of the educational literature. The results of the first year's report indicated that the teachers were using teaching/learning strategies that are described as "state-of-the-art" by the research literature.

South Pointe teachers rarely conducted lessons for the entire class. The teacher's primary role was that of coach, model, facilitator, listener, and guide. At South Pointe, associate teachers from a local university worked alongside a master teacher thereby reducing the teacher/pupil ratio. The active learner, not the teacher, was on center stage. Classroom observations revealed that students frequently engaged in cooperative learning activities. The master teacher and associate teacher moved from group to group offering assistance and guidance as needed. Small groups of students worked together using math and science manipulatives. Students worked daily with computer-assisted instruction in math and reading, with word processing to complete their process writing and project assignments and simulated problem-solving software.

Starting in the second grade, students planned their own math assignments and reviewed their plans with the teacher. Students often tackled higher-order projects and were taught to be strategic learners. They gradually learned about alternative ways of finding information that included accessing teachers, computers, the media center, volunteers, peers or cross-age tutors. The Swassing-Barbe Learning Modality Inventory was administered to each student, and 95% of the teachers surveyed in EAI's Teacher Survey indicated they used the results of the inventory to guide their instructional activities (Peeler, 1992).

Perhaps one of the more powerful activities that occurred at South Pointe was the involvement of parents in their children's learning program. Research has shown that parental involvement is a prime determinant in children's learning and success at school (Peeler, 1992). Four times a year the parent and teacher met for the purpose of setting and revising the student's Personal Education Plan (PEP). The parent conferences and other information concerning the PEP process are outlined in more detail in the section of this report entitled "Parent Empowerment Program."

The 1992 assessment report further revealed that the shared decision-making process used at the school was working well and the teachers interviewed believed they were empowered to make decisions concerning budgets, hiring, and curriculum matters.

Review of the 1992-1993 Assessment Report

The 1992-1993 Assessment Report focused on the extent to which the Tesseract program was an integral part of the vision and culture of the school.

As in the 1991-1992 report, the data used in the 1992-1993 report resulted from interviewing members of the professional staff, students, and parents. Classroom observations were conducted to determine the extent to which the Tesseract Way philosophy was becoming institutionalized into the regular patterns of operation within the school community.

The 1992-1993 Assessment Report's review of the literature (Peeler, 1993) indicates that vision and culture are important ingredients to the success of an organization or school. Organizational experts from the corporate and educational community such as Senge(1990), Fullan (1991), Covey (1989), Sergiovanni (1991), and Bennis (1985) indicated that successful businesses and schools have encompassing visions and cultures that provide the basis for bonding people together as members of a learning community—a community that knows its purpose, why it exists, and the importance of the clientele it serves.

Change Process

Research on the change process (Hall, Hord, Rutherford, & Huling-Austin, 1987; Fullan, 1991) indicates that a major reason for the past failures of public schools to sustain educational change lies in the fact that decision makers spend considerable staff development time and money in the initiation activities. Those are activities that happen prior to using the innovation such as staff development and funding. Far less attention is devoted to the implementation issues such as ongoing skill development, time to practice, and availability of resources.

EAI recognized these weaknesses in past innovative school programs. Throughout the 1991-1992 and 1992-1993 school years, consultants from EAI were present at South Pointe regularly to provide training for the teachers in areas such as curriculum, classroom management, and technology.

Reviews of the 1991-1992 Teacher Survey (Peeler, 1992) and teacher interviews conducted during the 1992-1993 school year revealed that teachers continued to like teaching at a Tesseract school and felt that they were part of an exciting educational experience. Classroom observations confirmed that the Tesseract Way philosophy and components were becoming institutionalized into the daily work culture of the staff.

As indicated in the 1992-1993 Tesseract Quality of Service Survey, parents continued to be highly satisfied with the program being offered to their children and would recommend the program to other parents (Peeler, 1993).

In addition to the Tesseract Quality of Service Survey, the attached Dade County Schools' 1992-1993 Report Card Survey of parent satisfaction indicated that the parents at South Pointe rated their school higher in all eight areas when compared to the average of all elementary schools in Dade County (See Appendix B).

Successful South Pointe Teaching/Learning Practices

The Tesseract Way program uses many of the best teaching/learning components available to educators. Three of these components in particular could be implemented in schools throughout the country: the parent empowerment program, use of technology, and the changing role of the teacher. That is not to say that cooperative learning, student learning styles, process writing, and other Tesseract Way components are not important. However, the research has been consistent in the past few years concerning the importance of parent involvement in student learning, the importance that technology will play in the future educational development of students, and the importance of placing the student on center stage with the teacher acting more as a coach, facilitator, model, guide, and listener.

Parent Empowerment Program

As reported in the 1991-1992 assessment report (Peeler, 1992) the research on the importance of parent involvement related to student achievement is well documented. Studies show that the extent of family participation in a child's education is more important than other family characteristics such as socioeconomic level or parental education (Henderson & Berla, 1994). When families are positively involved in their children's education, children perform better in school, achieve higher grades, and demonstrate more positive attitudes and behavior (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Becher, 1984).

At the center of the Tesseract Way is one of the more powerful teaching/learning principles used by EAI—the Personal Education Plan (PEP). The PEP is developed by the parent, teacher, and student, and it outlines the goals and objectives for that student.

Four parent conferences are held during the year with the first one differing significantly from what happens in most schools. At South Pointe, parent conferences are held prior to the opening of each school year. What is different about the first conference is not the timing of the conference but the content. The parent informs the teacher as much as possible about the child's social and academic strengths or deficiencies. Parents are encouraged to reveal as much as they feel necessary regarding the child's health and general family environment. It is during this first conference each year that the parent and teacher jointly set the goals for the child.

Three additional conferences are held during the year, and student progress is jointly assessed by parents, students, and teachers. Students are assessed through state-of-the-art authentic measures. Each student at South Pointe has a portfolio which remains at the school as long as the child is in attendance. The portfolios, containing pieces of student work from all subject areas, are used throughout the year by teachers to assess student performance. It is at the parent conferences that they become valuable tools for parents to assess the academic growth their children are making throughout the year. For many parents and students at South Pointe, the portfolios represent an opportunity to view growth over a three-year period.

Use of Technology

It is the philosophy of EAI to provide all of its Tesseract Way schools with state-of-the-art technology. There is mounting evidence which suggests that in order to function in today's society, America's public schools must welcome the use of technology in the classroom (Jordan, 1993). Students use computer-assisted instruction and word processing daily, including problem-solving software, interactive systems such as the Discourse Lab, and interactive educational television. However, as indicated in an earlier report (Peeler, 1993), computers are seldom used in subject areas other than in language arts and mathematics. As of June 1994, South Pointe Elementary was ordering advanced science laser discs and other subject area software for the purpose of expanding students' options in using computers. In addition, the school successfully competed for a $250,000 state grant to upgrade their local area network (LAN) system.

Student success with computer-assisted reading and math programs can be primarily attributed to the intensive in-service training the teachers received. In addition, EAI chose two well-known educational software firms (Computer Curriculum Corporation and Josten Corporation) for the math and reading programs. The teachers also use the computer for administrative tasks such as tracking student progress, documenting student attainment of key objectives, and highlighting important results of parent conferences.

Finally, South Pointe has embraced the Tesseract Way philosophy that all students should be trained in word processing. South Pointe students demonstrate excellent keyboarding skills. Word processing is what has become referred to as "PAC MAN with a purpose," and the projects South Pointe students have completed on their computers reflect the emphasis on word-processing training.

The Changing Role of Teachers

Teachers in Tesseract schools adjust to the strategy of yielding center stage and become more of a coach, facilitator, model, guide, and listener. As the teacher's role evolves from one of authority to that of facilitator or guide, it provides students with opportunities and resources to direct their own learning (Wilkes, 1994). Classroom observations and teacher interviews revealed that the favorable teacher/pupil ratio allowed teachers to implement the Tesseract Way program. EAI's corporate mission of reducing class size is accomplished in several ways: (1) South Pointe Elementary School in Miami has raised money from grants and corporate contributions; (2) in Baltimore, class size has been reduced by rebudgeting expenditures for administration, maintenance, and operations; and (3) other charter or voucher schools around the country are contracting out for maintenance and operations activities, cafeteria operations, and administrative services to funnel more money into the classroom.

Concluding Remarks

Dade County Public Schools and EAI signed a five-year contract which stipulated that EAI would manage the classroom activities at South Pointe Elementary School. EAI's stated goals were that the Tesseract Way program would be fully implemented and student achievement would improve.

A three-year analysis of the South Pointe Elementary School program indicates that the staff has been successful in implementing a variety of successful teaching/learning strategies from the research literature. Many of the elementary schools in this country use a few of the best teaching/learning principles used at South Pointe. However, closer examination of the Tesseract Way program indicates that EAI has taken the best teaching/learning strategies available and combined them into an integrated curriculum for students.

In this final report, three Tesseract Way teaching/learning principles have been reviewed that could have substantial benefits to other schools throughout the country: the parent empowerment program, the use of technology, and the changing role of the teacher.

Many of the leading educational experts on the change process and restructuring (Fullan, 1991; Elsmore, 1990; Lewis, 1989) indicate that successful restructuring can take as long as five years. The Tesseract Way program has, in many ways, successfully addressed the major areas of restructuring: changes in the teaching/learning process; changes in the professionalization of teachers; and empowerment of parents and community members. The release of test results was not authorized at the time of this report: there is no way to assess the impact on student achievement.

In June 1995, the five-year contract between South Pointe Elementary in Miami, FL and Educational Alternatives, Inc., ended and was not renewed.

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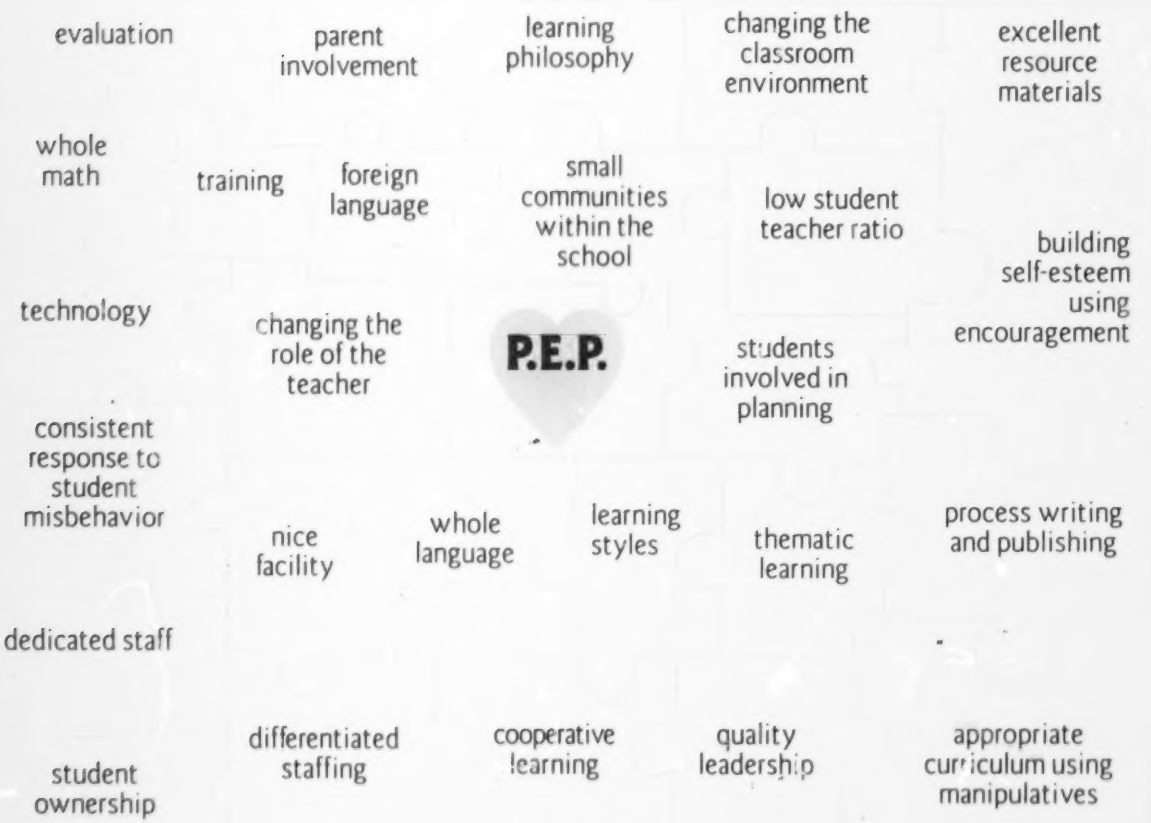
Appendix A

Tesseract Way Teaching/Learning Program

The Tesseract© Way



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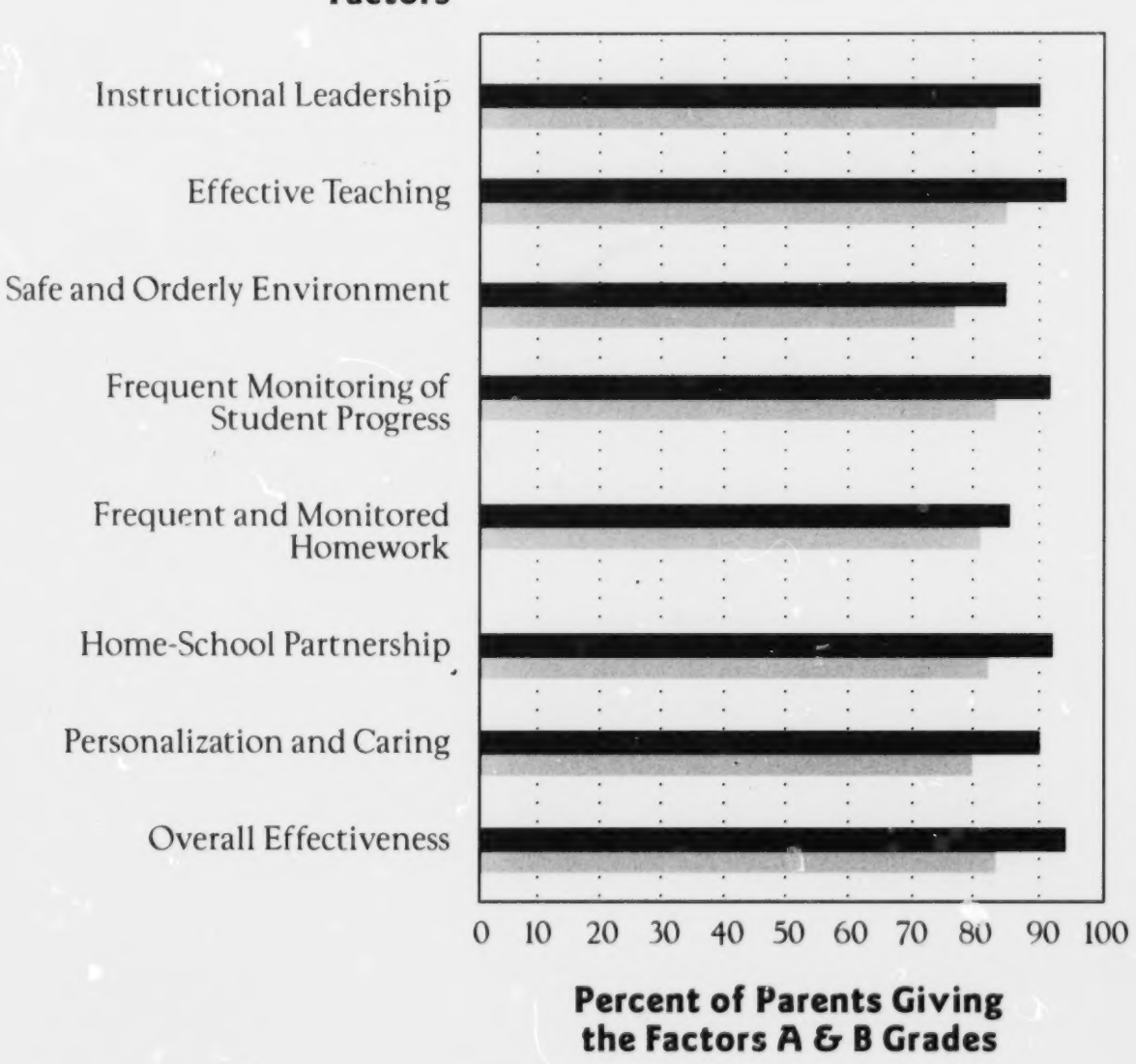
Appendix B

South Pointe Elementary School Report Card Survey: A Survey of Parent Perceptions 1992-1993 Administration


Factors
Instructional Leadership
Effective Teaching
Safe and Orderly Environment
Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress
Frequent and Monitored Homework
Home-School Partnership
Personalization and Caring
Overall Effectiveness
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
Percent of Parents Giving the Factors A & B Grades
South Pointe
All Dade Elementary Schools

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